



## CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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Date: February 21, 2007

To: Members of the Historical Commission

From: Sarah L. Burks, Preservation Planner

Re: D-1106: 178 Coolidge Hill (shop building)

An application to demolish the shop and studio buildings at Shady Hill School were received on February 12. The applicant, the Shady Hill School, was notified of an initial determination of significance for the shop building and a public hearing was scheduled for March 1. The staff made an initial determination that the studio building (1956) was not significant and did not schedule a hearing on that demolition request. A third building, a Quonset hut functioning as a tool shed, will be discussed in the body of this memo.

### Current Conditions

The shop is located on the western side of the Shady Hill School campus, accessed from Shady Hill Road, see Sanborn map attached. The shop is sited on a large institutional lot of 448,329 square feet lot in a Residence A-2 zone. This zone permits a Floor Area Ratio of 0.5 and imposes a height limit of 35 feet.

The shop building is a one-story, wood-frame structure on a concrete foundation, sided with wood shingles and painted gray. The low hip roof is covered with asphalt shingles. The windows are primarily of wood double-hung sash with divided lights, with the exception of the end of the building facing the parking lot on the west, which has casement sash of a recent vintage. The architectural character of the campus has purposefully remained consistent over the years and consists of buildings with a low domestic scale, long narrow footprints, wood materials, and generous natural light and air brought into the classrooms through the many windows. The current condition of the building's exterior is fair. Located on swampy terrain, the concrete foundation shows evidence of rising damp and the roof is mossy and sagging in some areas.

The school has plans for a major construction project on this end of campus, and has chosen the architectural firm of Machado and Silvetti Associates of Boston. The large gymnasium (1965) will be demolished and a new gym with a below-grade parking garage constructed. The arts studio and shop buildings will be demolished

and three new buildings constructed around a common courtyard. The existing foundation and footprint of the shop building will be used for one of the new buildings. (The proposed conditions drawings that have been provided depict the elevations of this entire grouping, rather than of each new building independently). The maintenance shed, which is located on the other side of the driveway from the studio and shop, is also over 50 years old. It is a Quonset hut erected in 1947.<sup>1</sup>

Due to the nature of the campus terrain and the potential for construction impact on the wetlands, the school is required to review its plans with the Conservation Commission. A hearing has been scheduled for February 26.

### History

The Coolidge farm, which once encompassed this entire hillside, remained intact until the 1910s. The Browne & Nichols School purchased the lower meadows of the farm in 1910-12 and Shady Hill School purchased the south slope of the hill in 1924.

The Cooperative Open Air School was founded in 1915 by a group of parents, led by William Ernest Hocking and Agnes Boyle O'Reilly Hocking. The school started on the sleeping porch of the Hocking's home at 16 Quincy Street. Parents originally shared teaching duties and generally believed in teaching from primary sources, without textbooks, and in the beneficial effects of plenty of fresh air in the classrooms. In 1917, the school moved to part of the Charles Eliot Norton estate near Shady Hill Square at the corner of Holden and Scott streets. Six frame buildings were built for the school on this second site. The school's adopted the name Shady Hill School around 1917-18. Construction of the campus on Coolidge Hill took place in 1925-26, requiring much filling on the swampy site, and the school opened in the new location in October of 1926.

The Coolidge Hill campus consists of eighteen buildings in small groupings on a total of 11 acres. The architect for the 1926 plan was David Barnes, who was also a parent of Shady Hill School pupils. It was cooperatively decided that the campus should be informal, with small classroom buildings grouped around a central assembly hall, as was the arrangement at the second campus at Shady Hill. Each classroom building had two homerooms, two group rooms, restrooms, and lockers. The buildings were not insulated, but heated by a central steam heating system. Construction costs for the school in 1925-26 totaled \$159,043.

The record indicates that this building was constructed during the first phase of campus construction (1917-1918) and moved to the Coolidge Hill campus in 1926. A concrete block addition was added in 1936. The building was moved approximately 100 feet to the south in 1954 and placed on a new foundation. A small addition on the east end was built in 1956. Further modifications were made in 1959 when the interior plan was reversed, switching the position of the boiler

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<sup>1</sup> The Quonset hut is a type of steel building with a round arched roof that was developed during World War II as a prefabricated and easy-to-install structure with great flexibility of use. Due to their adaptability, many wartime Quonset huts were sold as surplus after the war and put to use in civilian settings.

room and the mechanical shop. Extensive carpentry repairs were completed in 1995, including new sills, joists, and shingle siding. The result is a little like the adage of George Washington's axe, with much of the fabric having been replaced in kind over time.

#### Significance and Recommendation

The shop building is significant for its architecture, in terms of its period, style, and method of construction, and for its relationship to each phase of the school's architectural development. While it has undergone many renovations and much of the original fabric has been replaced, its materials and stylistic elements have been maintained in a consistent manner and its integrity is intact.

It is the staff recommendation that the structure be found significant for the reasons stated above, and that the Commission review the proposal for new construction and hear any public testimony before making a further determination.